



A Supervisory Newsletter from the Employee Advisory Service

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

The Employee Assistance Program to help you manage your most valuable resource— Employees

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Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. I will soon be supervising employees who work alone in field offices. If I am not present, what factors associated with their working alone will make it difficult in managing performance and making referrals to EAS?

A. Not seeing your employees frequently presents special challenges. Without face-to-face communication, it may be harder for you to trust those you supervise. You may doubt if they are doing their jobs. You may discover it is harder to locate employees and communication may be more difficult. Troubled employees may blame stress for their performance problems, and in part, it may be a contributing factor. Distant employees often believe that the central office does not understand the "real problems" they face, while those in the main office often think distant employees don't see the "big picture." Distant employees often do their jobs with fewer resources and equipment, and with less support. To supervise employees you don't see often, it is crucial to maintain good communication. Refer employees to EAS as you would others, but realize that you may have to consider the unique issues of field employees in evaluating performance.

■ Q. I'm a nice guy, and I am sure I have a reputation for avoiding conflict. I am also a new supervisor. So far things are going well, but do you think problems are just around the corner for me as a result of my easygoing style?

A. Although you are a nice and easygoing guy, without assertiveness skills and a willingness to confront problems, you will eventually be seen as weak by your employees and management. Sadly, the fact is that there are employees who are poor performers, have conduct problems, or exhibit behavior that is hazardous to others and the workplace. If you are not able to respond constructively to these employees, you will acquire a reputation for tolerating difficult employees at the expense of the organization and to the distress of hardworking, valuable employees. Predictably, by being too nice, you will lose your best employees, experience turnover, have more employee conflicts and absenteeism, watch employees socialize while you take more work home, and lose control over the productivity of your work unit. Consider contacting EAS to learn more about assertiveness skills and positive supervisory techniques.

■ Q. I want to support my employees and demonstrate that they can count on me. What is one of the most important steps I can take toward this goal?

A. A great place to start is getting to know your employees better. This is a skill often overlooked by supervisors that will enhance other steps you will take to support them. As you interact with your employees, remember their goals, work habits, temperaments, values, and what they like to do in their free time. A personal diary can be handy to keep track of this information. You will then be able to communicate more meaningfully with your employees and discuss topics other than work. Asking about a summer garden, how a college student is doing, or about a new pet, can help your employees feel you care about them personally. Believing you care is a crucial step in helping them feel supported. As a result, they will approach you earlier with their needs so you can solve workplace problems faster and provide the support they need. But never lose track of being the supervisor, not the pal. EAS can help you talk through these issues. Don't wait - it's tough to fix if you've established a non-supervisory relationship in the supervisory position.

■ Q. My employee's failure to complete work on time caused us to upset some customers. We decided not to take formal action, but referred her to the EAS. What steps can help me grow to trust her ability to handle key assignments?

A. The following approach can help you begin to trust your employee again: (1) As you give her assignments, state what you want her to accomplish and the times and dates by which you want specific tasks completed. (2) Start with small daily goals and graduate to larger ones. (3) Later, have your employee show you a list of objectives needed to accomplish any project or goal you assign to her. Have her rank objectives on a list according to their importance. Have your employee make a list of activities needed to reach each objective. Then help her prioritize those activities. Set weekly meetings to discuss her progress. Although you must decide how much hands-on supervision is needed, if things go well for a couple weeks, avoid the temptation to reduce the frequency or importance of your follow-up meetings.

■ Q. Can you provide a simple outline for writing a corrective letter? The last one I wrote showed my frustration and anger, and wasn't very useful in documenting my employee's performance problems.

A. Corrective letters help employees improve performance as well as provide documentation of the problem and required actions. The following outline supports both these purposes: (1) Description of the performance problem. (2) Statement regarding past discussions or warnings about the performance problem. (3) Statement of undesirable effects the performance problem or behavior has on the organization. (4) Statement of your expectations required in performance and when changes are expected. (5) Possible consequences for failure to make performance changes. (6) Statement of support for what is valued about employee's performance or abilities. (7) Reminder or recommendation to visit the EAP. (8) Plan of action for follow up by supervisor. (9) Statement thanking employee for attention to matters addressed in the letter. (10) Statement inviting employee to speak to you if clarification is needed regarding any part of the letter.

NOTES:

Visit EAS on our website at:
<http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

